DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 136 SO 013 685


AUTHOR Gutek, Gerald L.
TITLE Basic Education: A Historical Perspective. Fastbook 167.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Ind.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-87367-167-8
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 36p.; Sponsored by the North Texas State University/Texas Woman's University Chapter.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Eighth Street & Union Avenue, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402 ($0.75, quantity discounts available).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational History; Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Practices; Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; Humanistic Education; Progressive Education
IDENTIFIERS *Back to Basics; *Essentialism



ABSTRACT

This publication clarifies the basic education movement by placing it in a historical and philosophical context. In many ways, the basic education movement of the 1970s is part of a continuum of similar movements in American education that have occurred with almost clocklike regularity--appearing in rather regular cycles since the 1930s. First, the current basic education movement that originated in the 1970s is reviewed. Criticisms made by proponents of basic education and some remedies proposed that may cure the problems believed to exist today in public schooling are presented. The Essentialist movement of the 1930s is then examined. The Essentialists were a group of professional educators who challenged the then progressive trends in American education. Like today's advocates of basic education, the Essentialists charged that public education, despite its vast extent and heavy cost to society, was appalling, weak, and ineffective. They believed it was crucial that the curriculum be organized systematically and sequentially and that instruction stress logical, chronological and causal relationships. They argued that the teacher should be restored to a position of central authority in the classroom. Lastly, the publication discusses arguments of the educational critics of the 1950s. A new educational movement called "Life Adjustment Education" brought about by World War II became the target for a group of educational critics. The proponents of Life Adjustment Education maintained that the purpose of the schools should be broader in scope than stictly academic programs. The critics perceived of the function of the school in academic terms. (Author/RM)



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# Basic Education: A Historical Perspective

By Gerald L. Gutek

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Fastback 157

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 81-82470
ISBN 0-87367-167-8
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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the North Texas State University/Texas Woman's University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, which made a generous financial contribution toward publication costs.

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** ..... 7

**The Current Basic Education Movement** ..... 9
Criticisms and Remedies ..... 9

**Essentialism** ..... 14
The Essentialist Rationale for Educational Theory and Practice ..... 17
What Are the Essentials? ..... 19

**The Critics of the 1950s** ..... 21
Life Adjustment Education ..... 22
Tensions of the Cold War ..... 24
Arthur E. Bestor and the Intellectual Disciplines ..... 25
Hyman G. Rickover ..... 27
Rickover's Recommendations ..... 30
Max Rafferty ..... 30
The Impact of the Critics of the 1950s ..... 32

**Return to Basic Education** ..... 35

**Notes** ..... 36

**Selected References** ..... 37

# Introduction

During the 1970s, a pervasive educational mood in the U.S. was expressed by the slogan, "Let's get back to the basics." I call it a mood rather than an organized movement because, unlike other movements in educational history, the drive for basic education differed initially in that it involved few leaders of a national political or educational stature; nor were the basic education advocates enrolled in a single organization. While the back-to-basics proponents varied widely in their strategies, a common philosophical strand ran through their arguments.

The unique characteristic of the current basic education movement was that it originated at the local and state levels among parents, citizens, and laymen. Occasionally, a politician would sound the praises of the basics, but professional educators were generally missing from the basic education ranks. Although a few could be found in the Council for Basic Education, established two decades earlier in the 1950s, the majority of professional educators, be they professors of education, school administrators, or classroom teachers, were generally absent from or apprehensive about the movement. When challenged by basic education proponents, professional educators generally replied that they did not understand the movement, could not identify what was basic about basic education, or took such a broad view of basic education that they considered the current curriculum to be basic. When professional educators finally responded to basic education demands in the late 1970s, they were usually identified with testing and evaluation and were attempting to identify minimal competencies to determine if students at specific grade levels had attained certain minimal skills in

reading, writing, and computation. As the 1980s began, the impact of the current basic education movement was manifested in several ways.

1. The demand for a return to the basics was still being heard at the local and state levels from individuals and groups who believed that public school graduates were deficient in basic literacy and mathematical competencies.

2. Legislatures, school boards, and offices of education in a number of states had mandated some form of competency-based testing and occasionally some form of competency-based curriculum.

3. Professional educators and their organizations were responding to the movement either by debating the meaning of basic education or by joining the effort to devise competency-based curricula and tests.

That the basic education movement of the 1970s has continued into the 1980s and that it will have a significant impact on professional educators, school administrators, and American education in general is widely accepted. Like other movements in American education such as progressivism in the early twentieth century, the contemporary basic education movement is often misunderstood. The confusion surrounding basic education emanates from several sources: 1) The amorphous characteristics of the movement contribute to misunderstanding in that it means different things to different people; 2) Some professional educators who feel threatened by the critical nature of the movement have chosen not to understand it. Indeed, basic education proponents who question the competency of professional educators often appear to be on a confrontation course with the school-based establishment.

In this fastback I shall clarify the basic education movement by placing it in a historical and philosophical context. In many ways, the basic education movement of the 1970s is part of a continuum of similar movements in American education that have occurred with almost clocklike regularity—appearing in rather regular cycles since the 1930s. I shall: 1) review the current basic education movement that originated in the 1970s; 2) examine the Essentialist movement of the 1930s; and 3) examine the arguments of the educational critics of the 1950s. As these three episodes in recent American educational history are examined, a philosophical rationale that embraces the major and persistent themes in basic education will emerge.

## The Current Basic Education Movement

Rather than follow a strict chronology let me identify the major trends of the current basic education movement and compare them with the Essentialists of the 1930s and the critics of the 1950s. Today's basic education movement is strong but amorphous. While national in scope, its impact is most evident at the state and local levels. Often, school board members are elected on basic education platforms. Some local and state superintendents of education have built reputations as basic education advocates. Grassroots organizations of parents argue for curriculum revision based on a return to the basics. Tax-conscious citizen's watchdog committees often argue to cut the frills and fads and to get back to the basics. At times, both political conservatives and leaders of minority groups may be found supporting the general goals of basic education.

The ambiguity surrounding basic education moved Ben Brodinsky to write:

> There is a movement in American education which irritates some educators, baffles others, and raises high the hackles of still others. Its stirrings put many a school administrator and scholar on the defensive. It is usually led by parents, ministers, businessmen, and politicians.[1]

Since it lacks precise definition, a list of its arguments will help to show the current face of the basic education movement.

### Criticisms and Remedies

Following are some criticisms made by proponents of basic education and some remedies they propose that will cure the problems they believe exist today in public schooling:

1. *Criticism:* Educational experimentation, social promotion, and

the neglect of basic skills have led to attrition of academic standards in our elementary schools. Many American children either have not been prepared adequately in basic skills or have been promoted with inadequate preparation in these areas.

*Remedy:* Basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic should be emphasized more strongly in elementary schools. Teachers and administrators should be held accountable for seeing that students achieve these skills before promoting them to higher grades. Furthermore, instruction in language arts, natural science, and social studies should emphasize the learning of essential facts, concepts, and principles.

2. *Criticism:* Along with the deterioration of skill learning in elementary schools, standards of academic achievement in secondary schools have declined. This decline has been aggravated by social promotion policies, permissiveness, and a downgrading of academic disciplines, with an attendant emphasis on electives, nonacademic programs, and minicourses.

*Remedy:* American secondary schools should stress academic courses in English, basic sciences such as chemistry and physics, mathematics, and history. A limited number of vocational courses may be included. Above all, the emphasis should be on the learning of facts, concepts, principles, and the application of subject matter in a no-nonsense, direct fashion.

3. *Criticism:* American society has shown a decline in fundamental moral, ethical, and civic values. A general weakening of family, religious, and patriotic values has occurred in twentieth century America. In schools, this moral decline has been reflected in increased violence, vandalism, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, and alcoholism.

*Remedy:* Public school teachers and administrators should transmit basic values and exhibit well-defined standards of behavior. Administrators and teachers should occupy positions of respect and use this position to assert the basic values of punctuality, hard work, respect for authority, obedience to the law, and a general affirmation of traditional American values.

4. *Criticism:* Many educators have contributed to the decline of standards by de-emphasizing competition, by advocating social pro-

motion, and by downgrading the academic nature of the school. Because the academic function of the school has been obscured and diluted by nonacademic activities, administrators and teachers have blurred their areas of responsibility and have not been sufficiently accountable for the academic achievement of their students.

*Remedy:* Public school administrators and teachers should recognize that their primary responsibility is their students' academic achievement. They should do everything possible to promote academic skill learning and academic achievement. To make sure that they fulfill this responsibility, they should be held strictly accountable for the success or failure of their students through the use of tests and other types of evaluation.

5. *Criticism:* Instruction in public schools has deteriorated because of the introduction of so-called innovative procedures, the employment of poorly prepared teachers, the emphasis on sensitivity training and other group processes, and the use of pre-packaged educational materials. In some cases, students are given complete freedom to choose what they want to learn. Many teachers are unable to maintain discipline.

*Remedy:* Teachers should be mature, ethical persons, who know the content of their discipline and who are expert in teaching it. Teachers should spend time on academic instruction and not on nonacademic, social, or emotional adjustment activities. Instruction should focus on textbooks, include drill, and feature recitations, daily homework assignments, and frequent testing and evaluation.

6. *Criticism:* Professional educators tend to make schooling overly complicated. They use jargon that is generally imprecise, often nonsensical, and usually confusing for parents and citizens. Often, they engage in ill-conceived social experimentation rather than concentrating on basic skills and knowledge. They tend to prefer the untested and experimental to the tried and true.

*Remedy:* Educators should be honest and direct with the public and respond to their demands, criticisms, and questions in clear and direct language. They should not hide behind educational jargon. Rather than encourage social or psychological experimentation, they should

do what the public pays them to do—teach basic skills and subject matter to students.

7. *Criticism:* Since the 1960s, there has been too much untested innovation in the public schools. The "new math," "new social studies," and "new science," were introduced without adequate testing. Today, students' performance on SAT examinations reveal a continuing decline in academic performance. Team teaching, open space, individualized instruction, modular scheduling, and other "innovations" have served to obscure the academic purpose of the school and have created a pedagogical jungle for parents.

*Remedy:* It is the time to stop the wholesale adoption of innovations that often detract from the teaching of the basic skills and subject matter. They are expensive and have not produced measurable academic achievement. The most effective instructional arrangement is the self-contained classroom in the elementary school and subject matter departments in the high school.

8. *Criticism:* American public education has grown increasingly bureaucratic and expensive. Many school administrators are highly paid managers who ignore or neglect academic learning. Teachers are unionized and have sought increased economic rewards that are often unrelated to educational purposes. Many costly social services have been introduced into the schools that detract from the basic curriculum.

*Remedy:* It is time to restore a strictly academic focus to the schools. Such courses as sex education, driver training, guidance, and drug education should be eliminated along with other frills. Public school bureaucracies should be cut back so that funds can be spent on skill and subject matter teaching rather than be dissipated on myriad nonacademic activities.

9. *Criticism:* Student achievement in American public schools is imprecisely measured. Parents are often uncertain as to the criteria used to evaluate their children. Often nonacademic social criteria are used for promotion. The most serious threat to academic achievement in the public schools has been the social promotion policies used in many

schools. As a result, academically unprepared students are promoted to higher grade levels regardless of their competency. Thousands of functional illiterates are graduated from high schools without competency in basic skills. Not only has social promotion lowered academic standards, it also has lowered national economic productivity.

*Remedy:* Academic achievement can be measured precisely. Promotions from grade to grade and graduation from high school should be permitted only after mastery of skills and knowledge has been demonstrated on tests that accurately measure a student's competency. There must be an end to the policy of the social promotion of functional illiterates in American schools.

The foregoing criticisms of our public schools and the proposed remedies are the essential themes of the contemporary basic education movement. In light of these current themes, let us now examine them in two earlier but similar movements—the Essentialism of the 1930s and the school critics of the 1950s.

First, this examination will demonstrate that many of the current themes of basic education are not new but have occurred in the recent past. The recurrence of these themes suggests that professional educators have not answered some fundamental questions raised repeatedly in recent American educational history. Second, examining these two historical, basic education movements from the recent past makes it possible to identify and illuminate some of the persistent philosophical threads that underlie the current basic education posture.

## Essentialism

The Essentialist movement of the 1930s raised some significant but often neglected questions about the nature and condition of American public education. The Essentialists, a group of professional educators who challenged the then progressive trends in American education, were philosophical compatriots to many current basic education advocates.

Rejecting much of progressivism, a committee of professional educators consisting of Michael Demiashkevich, Walter H. Ryle, M. L. Shane, Louis Shores, and Guy M. Whipple met in Atlantic City in 1938 to prepare a remonstrance against declining scholastic standards and to proclaim the Essentialist platform. Essentialism, a term used by Demiashkevich, saw the school's primary function as the preservation of the basic elements of human culture and the transmission of them to the young. In announcing their position, the Essentialists asked:

> Should not our public schools prepare boys and girls for adult responsibility through systematic training in such subjects as reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and English, requiring mastery of such subjects, and, when necessary, stressing discipline and obedience?[2]

Essentialism's most articulate spokesman was William C. Bagley (1872-1946), a professor of education at Teachers College Columbia University and editor of *School and Society*, who set down the Essentialist critique and recommendations for improving American education.

Like today's advocates of basic education, Bagley charged that despite "its vast extent and heavy cost to society, public education in the United States is in many ways appalling, weak and ineffective." As

Arthur Bestor and Admiral Rickover would do in the 1950s, Bagley compared American public education with European systems and found American schools to be academically inferior. At the elementary level, he charged that "Age for age, the average pupil of our elementary schools does not meet the standards of achievement in the fundamentals of education that are attained in the elementary schools of many other countries."[3] Further, Bagley found the graduates of American high schools to be scholastically behind those of other countries. Bagley also claimed that many American high school graduates were essentially illiterate. He and his Essentialist colleagues charged that the increase in the number of functional illiterates with high school diplomas was caused by a decline in reading effectiveness. Deficiencies at lower grade levels in reading, Bagley alleged, had resulted in the need for remedial reading classes in many high schools. Bagley's criticism of reading instruction in American education was a charge that was repeated by the critics of the 1950s and by the basic education proponents of the 1970s.

Writing in the 1930s, Bagley commented on his perception that the crime rate had increased at the same time that public school attendance had also increased. He reasoned that the increase in school attendance by a larger number of Americans should have reduced the crime rate.

Bagley's comments on the failure of compulsory school attendance to reduce the crime rate resembled the charges of current critics that public schools are not only ineffective in reducing the crime rate but often have become, in many instances, centers for drug abuse, violence, and vandalism rather than agencies for cultivating a sense of law and order. Like contemporary critics, Bagley severely indicted the practice of social promotion, which, he said, led to "the complete abandonment in many schools of rigorous standards of scholastic achievement as a condition of promotion from grade to grade, and the passing of all pupils 'on schedule'."[4] Social promotion, Bagley charged, produced academically handicapped, overgraded, secondary students who lacked mastery of fundamentals.

The Essentialists believed it was crucial that the curriculum be organized systematically and sequentially and that instruction stress logical, chronological, and causal relationships. In particular, Bagley

condemned the "incidental learning" theory advanced by such progressives as William Heard Kilpatrick, his colleague at Teachers College, who claimed that students would learn fundamental skills and knowledge concomitantly or incidentally as they solved problems, participated in group activities, and worked on projects. Bagley charged that many American educators had substituted incidental learning for structured, organized, teacher-initiated and directed instruction. The Essentialist attack on incidental learning was similar to the criticism that current basic education advocates have leveled against new curricular innovations, especially those of the 1960s such as the "new mathematics," the "new social studies," and the various new approaches to science education. While Bagley decried the deemphasis on the "exact and exacting studies" and the "disparagement of system and sequence in learning," contemporary critics of the curricular innovations of the 1960s have charged that the "discovery method" or "inquiry method" is inefficient and causes students to "reinvent the wheel" rather than master the funded knowledge of the past in an orderly way. Contemporary critics argue that the process and method of learning has been overemphasized to the detriment of content. While the innovators of the 1960s promised that they would teach children how to think, the critics of the 1970s and 1980s have argued that, in order to think, students must have something to think about. Like Bagley, they argue that the curriculum should have a content that is logically or chronologically structured.

During the late 1930s when the Essentialist platform appeared, the U.S. was gripped by the Great Depression. In response to the social, economic, and political problems of the Depression-ridden era, George S. Counts asked the question, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* Counts' query stimulated the growth of the Social Reconstructionist movement, which called upon professional educators to join other progressive individuals and groups to create a new society based on an ideology of "democratic collectivism." Adamantly rejecting the notion that educators should use the schools as agencies of social engineering, Bagley attacked the Social Reconstructionist proposition as committing the schools to a particular political ideology that would lead to the indoctrination of students.

Instead of indoctrinating children and youth, Bagley argued that democratic interests would be served best by a school program that emphasized fundamental skills and the learning of knowledge that was of unquestioned permanence and value. Bagley reasoned that a democratic society requires literate citizens. A literate society, knowledgeable in fundamental skills and knowledge, was, for him, the "basis for intelligent understanding and for the collective thought and judgment that are the essence of democratic institutions."[5]

Bagley's judgment that a democratic society needed disciplined methods of inquiry anticipated Arthur E. Bestor's call in the 1950s for the reassertion of fundamental intellectual disciplines in the American secondary school curriculum. Bagley's rejection of using schools for social reconstruction is similar to the arguments of current basic education proponents who oppose using the schools as agencies of social experimentation and directed social change.

Like today's basic education advocates, the Essentialists argued four decades earlier that the teacher should be restored to a position of central authority in the classroom. Again and again, Bagley argued that children had a right to expect and to receive adult guidance and direction.

## The Essentialist Rationale for Educational Theory and Practice

An articulate educator, Bagley clearly identified the key concepts of an Essentialist philosophy of education. Since the contemporary basic education movement badly needs a coherent philosophical rationale, its advocates would be well advised to examine Bagley's work for suggestions toward a philosophy for basic education. It would also be advisable for the opponents of basic education to reflect on the fundamental, but still unanswered, questions that Bagley raised more than 40 years ago. What follows are they key characteristics of an Essentialist rationale.

*An emphasis on effort.* Learning valuable skills and knowledge requires the expenditure of time and effort. Many of the permanent and persistent interests of adult life have resulted from efforts that initially may not have been interesting or appealing to the learner. While the child's interest should not be ignored, all learning should not be based

on the child's limited range of experience. The Essentialist position argues that there are many things to learn that, while they may not be of immediate interest to the learner, can become both valuable and permanently interesting at a later time in a person's life.

*An emphasis on discipline.* To advance the attitude that a person has absolute freedom to do as he or she pleases, without regard to personal and social consequences, is to invite moral and social anarchy. "Doing your own thing" is an insufficient justification in education. Nor is it possible for children to create and live in their own reality as many romantic child-centered educators have suggested since the time of Rousseau. Genuine and lasting freedom is won and preserved by the systematic discipline of learning what needs to be learned for survival in a civilized society.

*An emphasis on the accumulated knowledge of the human race.* By sustained inquiry, scientific investigation, and literary and artistic achievement the human race has created a cultural heritage that is one generation's legacy to the next. So that the cultural heritage can be transmitted efficiently, it has been organized into units of subject matter, that can be taught at age-appropriate levels. As a cultural agency, the school's primary task is to transmit the cultural heritage to the young so that they may share and participate in it. For the Essentialist, the transmission of the cultural heritage must be done systematically and deliberately rather than incidentally or haphazardly.

*An emphasis on teacher-initiated learning.* The human infant is long dependent on adult care. Children have the right to expect that adults will provide the guidance and control they need to grow and develop. Society has the right to expect that teachers possess basic skills and knowledge and have the professional competence to transmit that knowledge by systematic instruction.

*An emphasis on logical organization of subject matter.* In elementary schools, learners need to master the basic skills of reading, writing, and computation. These fundamental skills have generative power in that they are the foundation for learning other skills and for learning organized bodies of knowledge. Instruction in these important skills should be systematic and sequential.

The accumulated experience of the human race is vast and com-

plex. For instructional purposes, it is best organized into subject matter disciplines that are arranged either logically or chronologicaiiy. Each subject matter has its own pattern of organization and the curriculum should reflect these patterns.

Although learning by activities, projects, and discovery methods may be appropriate at various times in a child's school experience, it is always necessary that care be given to organizing the curriculum according to a systematic structure and sequence.

*An emphasis on long-range goals.* While it is true that society has experienced profound social change, it is equally true that the human race has abiding interests and concerns of a perennial nature. The school's educational program should not be based on what appears to be immediately relevant and popular at the moment. Fashions and styles may change, but the essentials of a good education are permanent.

As individuals grow from childhood to maturity, their interests will change. While these changing interests can be significant, it is of paramount importance that the long-range needs of human beings and of society be recognized in the education of a person.

**What Are the Essentials?**

Today, basic education proponents are often asked, "What are the basics?" Frequently, they disagree among themselves. Similarly, the Essentialists were asked, "What are the essentials?" In responding, Bagley outlined an Essentialist curriculum appropriate to elementary education.

*Basic social arts.* Emphasis should be given to the basic social arts of communicating, recording, computing, and measuring, which may be translated as reading, writing, speaking, and arithmetic.

*Space and time.* A good education should provide for the widening of the space horizon and the broadening of the time perspective. Space and time, which can be equated with geography and history, serve to acquaint learners with the world lying beyond their own immediate experience. History, in particular, provides an acquaintance with the human past, especially the story of one's own country.

*Health education.* The principles of health instruction and the

inculcation of good health practices are basic phases in a child's elementary school program.

*Natural science.* The elementary school curriculum should include the basic concepts and methods of the natural sciences.

*Fine arts.* Art and music have a place in an Essentialist curriculum. Creative and expressive skills and activities should be part of a child's school experience.

*Industrial arts.* Unlike some contemporary basic education proponents, the Essentialists provided for industrial arts in the curriculum.

# The Critics of the 1950s

The major debates between the Essentialist and progressive educators took place in the late 1930s. The entry of the U.S. into World War II stilled this particular educational controversy without resolving the fundamental issues. The fundamental issues raised by such educational statesmen of the 1930s as John Dewey, Harold Rugg, George Counts, William Heard Kilpatrick, Isaac Kandel, and William C. Bagley waited for an answer. Such questions as the following were not resolved in theory or practice: What is the purpose of the school? Should schools reflect the culture or seek to reconstruct it? What is the nature of the curriculum? The urgency of responding to wartime needs and to peacetime readjustment took priority over the discussion and resolution of such fundamental philosophical issues.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, American education was faced with urgent quantitative demands. A brief recital of these demands will help to set the scene for the educational debates of the 1950s.

*Burgeoning enrollments.* One of the most pressing needs of the 1950s was to build new schools for a rapidly expanding school-age population. Many present-day school administrators had their formative professional experiences during the era of quantitative growth in American education. Unfortunately some of these people simplistically equated quantity with quality.

*A demand for teachers.* As the number of pupils and classrooms increased in the 1950s, the demand for teachers accelerated. School systems, both large and small, had to cope with the problem of teacher shortage. Although colleges and schools of education operated at high

speed to prepare large numbers of certificated teachers, the demand for teachers outdistanced the supply; and school districts resorted to hiring teachers with provisional or temporary certification. Again, in many instances, teacher preparation programs were devoted primarily to meeting the quantitative needs of schooling.

*An emphasis on adjustment.* Like most postwar eras, the years after World War II were a time of adjustment for Americans. Returning veterans had to adjust from war to peace; the economy had to adjust from wartime controls to decontrols; and most pervasively, Americans had to adjust to a society that was more transient, more mobile, and more affluent than ever before. A major new element in American life was the emergence of suburbia. The suburbs that ringed the large cities became the scene of frenzied residential construction, and the influx of people who bought these new homes stimulated massive school building projects.

The social change of the postwar era was unsettling to American life. The American family structure was shaken by the new freedoms of the postwar era. Along with the pervasive social changes of the era, there was an increase in juvenile unrest and delinquency. The new times brought with them a greater awareness of and a sensitivity to the problems of youth in a changing society.

## Life Adjustment Education

In the midst of the vast quantitative changes that were occurring both in American society and in schools, a new educational movement called "Life Adjustment Education" was born. In many ways, life adjustment education was an attempt to adjust to the stress of coping with the pervasive social and economic changes that swept the U.S. in the postwar decade. In other ways, it tended to fill the vacuum created by the decline of progressive education. While life adjustment education was a response to the stresses and strains brought about by World War II, it also became the target for a group of educational critics of the 1950s, who argued for a return to basic education. To understand the arguments of such critics of the 1950s as Arthur Bestor, Hyman Rickover, and Max Rafferty, let us look briefly at life adjustment education.

The National Commission on Life Adjustment Education for Sec-

ondary School Youth was established in 1947. Along with this national commission, a number of state commissions were created with similar purposes. The impetus for life adjustment education initially came from a resolution for restructuring secondary education by Charles A. Prosser at a U.S. Office of Education conference in 1945. Prosser, a long-time leader in industrial and vocational education, argued that although American secondary schools served the 20% of youth bound for college and the 20% preparing for vocations, they neglected the remaining 60% who needed life adjustment training. According to *Vitalizing Secondary Education*, published by the U.S. Office of Education, life adjustment education:

> . . . is designed to equip all American youth to live democratically with satisfaction to themselves and profit to society as home members, workers and citizens. It is concerned especially with a sizable proportion of youth of high school age (both in school and out) whose objectives are less well served by our schools than the objectives of preparing for either a skilled occupation or higher education.[6]

As life adjustment education developed, several general trends emerged that influenced public schools:

1. A highly prescribed curriculum was rejected in favor of one based on the individual development of students and their needs as well as the needs of society.

2. All normal adolescents were to begin and complete high school.

3. Evaluation was not to be used as a means to eliminate certain pupils from high school.

4. A student's progress was to be determined by skills and understandings gained through participation in individual, family, work, and civic activities rather than by mastering abstract concepts in logically organized subject matter courses.

5. The distinction between extracurricular activities and the academic curriculum was to be modified substantially. Excursions, travel, community work, hobbies, and other direct experiences were to become an integral part of the educational program rather than ancillary to it.

Although life adjustment education was never established on a pervasive national scale, it did make a significant impact across the country. In general, the life adjustment approach, especially for secondary

education, maintained that the purpose of the school should be broader in scope than a strictly academic program. Schools should be concerned with a wide range of issues and problems that relate to the social, emotional, economic, and vocational needs of youth. Further, since the American public high school is an institution for all adolescents, regardless of academic talent or vocational destination, it should diversify its instructional program to meet their personal and social needs.

It could be anticipated that those who perceived of the function of the school in academic terms would tend to oppose this broadening of the role of the school as confusing and a dilution of its academic role.

## Tensions of the Cold War

At the same time as American public schooling moved in the direction of life adjustment education in the 1950s, the tensions generated by the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union began to have an impact on American education. Because of these international tensions, there was a great concern expressed about the role of education in national security, especially in the areas of technology and science. The early successes of the Soviet Union in space exploration, marked by the launching of Sputnik in 1957, caused a number of critics to make some comparisons of U.S. schools with the educational systems of Europe. In these comparisons, the American system was usually judged as academically inferior.

Critics, such as Arthur Bestor, Max Rafferty, and Hyman Rickover, challenged in three interrelated areas the basic direction that public education had taken since World War II: 1) American public schooling had grown pedagogically weak due to life adjustment education, which ignored the basic skills and academic disciplines. 2) American public schools were academically inferior to the schools of many European nations. While Soviet schools concentrated on the hard sciences, American schools had de-emphasized the rigorous scientific study that was needed for survival in the Cold War. 3) An overly permissive attitude in American schools had lowered standards of civic and moral responsibility. This decline of standards was particularly evident in adolescent speech and behavior.

The following sections will examine three of the major critics of the

1950s and compare them to the earlier Essentialists of the 1930s and the basic education advocates of the 1970s.

### Arthur E. Bestor and the Intellectual Disciplines

One of the most intellectually penetrating critics of the 1950s was Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., then a professor of history at the University of Illinois and author of two influential books, *Educational Wastelands* and *The Restoration of Learning*, that provoked serious debate over the purposes of American education.

Bestor launched an attack on professional educators for devitalizing the academic quality of American education with life adjustment programs. He alleged that certain professional educationists had banded together in an interlocking directorate composed of professors of education, members of state departments of education, and school administrators to promote what was essentially an anti-intellectual educational philosophy. According to Bestor:

> One of the gravest charges that can be made against the professional educationists is that they have undermined public confidence in the schools by setting forth purposes for education so trivial as to forfeit the respect of thoughtful men, and by deliberately divorcing the schools from the disciplines of science and scholarship, which citizens trust and value.[7]

Bestor called for a philosophical redirection of American education that would reassert the teaching of fundamental intellectual disciplines. Organized as they were in the mature world of science and scholarship, these disciplines were to be presented in a systematic manner to all students. Calling the intellectual disciplines the fundamental ways of thinking, Bestor wrote:

> An indispensable function of education, at every level, is to provide sound training in the fundamental ways of thinking represented by history, science, mathematics, literature, language, art, and other disciplines evolved in the course of mankind's long quest for usable knowledge, cultural understanding, and intellectual power.[8]

Bestor argued that the intellectual disciplines were much more than a collection of facts. They were disciplined and orderly ways of think-

ing with organized structures and methods of their own. The public school curriculum, especially in the high school, said Bestor, should stress the ordered relationships and methods of inquiry appropriate to each basic field of knowledge. Teacher competency should be evaluated on the basis of skilled instruction in each intellectual discipline.

As Bagley did two decades earlier, Bestor, the leading spokesman for basic education in the 1950s, defined the school's role as that of transmitting the cultural heritage by means of the established intellectual disciplines. Only through intellectual power, gained from disciplined learning, would a new generation be able to master the problems of new and changing environments. Thus, the school's fundamental task was to transmit the power of disciplined thinking to the younger generation.

Again, like Bagley, Bestor set down what he considered to be the fundamentals of the public school curriculum. After identifying reading, writing, and arithmetic as fundamental in the elementary school, Bestor gave his greatest attention to defining the secondary school curriculum, which was to consist of disciplined study in five broad areas.

1. *The English language.* The study of the English language involved first, learning the rudimentary skills of reading and writing, and then proceeding to the systematic study of grammar. As the students progressed, they were to read and analyze increasingly complex examples of literature and to practice writing under competent guidance and criticism.

2. *Mathematics.* Instruction in mathematics was to begin with the simple practice of counting and then lead systematically through arithmetic (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) to the more abstract and sophisticated mathematical reasoning represented by algebra, geometry, and calculus.

3. *Science.* Science instruction was to begin diffusely with the natural sciences and then become organized into the systematic branches of biology, chemistry, and physics.

4. *History.* History was to be studied continuously with diffuse narratives, and then continue into the methodical study of major chronological periods and geographical divisions, with special emphasis on political and constitutional aspects.

5. *Foreign language.* Students were to study systematically at least one foreign language; they were to begin their study early enough to ensure mastery by the end of secondary schooling.

Like the Essentialists, Bestor argued for a logical sequence in the curriculum with the reasoning that "Because clear thinking is systematic thinking, liberal education involves the logical organization of knowledge." Students need to see the structure of the discipline they are studying, said Bestor, who opposed the trends toward interdisciplinary studies.

**Hyman G. Rickover**

Hyman G. Rickover, known as the father of the atomic submarine, was another leading educational critic of the 1950s. Admiral Rickover, who supervised the design and planning of the first American nuclear-powered submarine, the Nautilus, had become increasingly concerned about the academic quality of American education. In testimony before Congressional committees and in a series of articles and books, Rickover compared the academic quality of American students to their European counterparts. In his books, *Report on Russia, Education and Freedom, Swiss Schools and Ours: Why Theirs are Better,* and *American Education—A National Failure,* Rickover penned a strong indictment of American public education. He claimed that the quality of American education had been eroded under the influence of Dewey's Experimentalist philosophy. Like Bestor, Rickover felt that academic quality had deteriorated most severely in American secondary schools.

Venturing into comparative education to make his case, Rickover charged that American schools were academically inferior to those of Europe. His arguments resembled those advanced by the Essentialists some 20 years earlier. His critique suggested that: 1) American schools were failing to tap the intellectual potential of academically talented students; 2) The public schools were contributing to an educational lag that was adversely affecting American science, technology, and culture; and 3) American educators could learn from the European educational experience, which respected and cultivated human intelligence by rigorous academic study.

Many of Rickover's recommendations for reforming American edu-

cation paralleled those of Bestor. Although particularly interested in science, Rickover, like Bestor, believed that a "foundation of a liberal arts education" was needed so that educated persons could use their "specialized training wisely."[9] Testifying before the House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations in 1959, Rickover outlined the core of a liberal education as history, anthropology, economics, foreign languages and literatures, mathematics, science, and English.[10]

To Rickover, American schools were deficient for their failure to offer a systematic academic curriculum and their unwillingness or inability to challenge the intellectual potential of academically talented students.

Rickover believed that the American school curriculum had degenerated under the influence of educators steeped in progressive and life adjustment philosophy. The entry of academically weak courses had detracted from the more solid disciplines of history, geography, mathematics, and science. In contrast to the ill-defined objectives of American schools, Rickover claimed that European schools had clearly defined academic and cultural goals.

In particular, Rickover believed that the multiple-track, ability grouping system of secondary education in Europe was superior to the American comprehensive secondary school. European educators deliberately matched a student's academic ability with an appropriate type of schooling. In contrast, American educators refused to structure the curriculum to fit a student's academic aptitude on the grounds that it was elitist and undemocratic. Like Bestor, Rickover argued that a confused and simplistic notion of democracy had equated equality of educational opportunity with sameness.

In 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, it did not take long for public scrutiny to focus on American education. The debate between Bestor and his academic allies and the professional educators over life adjustment education was now intensified. The kind of arguments that Rickover was making, based on comparative evidence, now gave the educational controversy of the 1950s an international as well as a domestic dimension.

Rickover's testimony and report before the House Committee on Appropriations in 1959 took place in a time of educational crisis, con-

troversy, and urgency. Rickover claimed that graduates of the Soviet Union's 10-year school were at least two years ahead of their American counterparts in mastering "sound, basic education," which he defined as "mathematics, the sciences, mastery of the mother tongue, knowledge of their own classical literature and that of major foreign nations, foreign languages, and history—though their history study is colored by Marxist doctrine."[11] Further, Rickover commented that the Soviets identified their talented youth, particularly the upper 30% who were sent on to the university, especially for study in science and engineering.

Continuing to use comparative evidence to support his argument that American schools were generally academically inferior to European, Rickover compared Swiss and American schools. Unlike the totalitarian and communistic Soviet Union, Switzerland was democratic, federal, and capitalistic. Although much smaller in size and population than the U.S., there were similarities in political, economic, and cultural lifestyles. Despite these similarities, Rickover identified some sharp dissimilarities between Swiss and American educational styles. For example, American educators tended to invest heavily in bricks and mortar, in physical facilities, while the Swiss frugally used their resources for instruction rather than expensive and elaborate buildings. Rickover wrote that "Swiss children obtain a good, but not luxurious, education." Educational resources were not used in Switzerland for "elaborate buildings and facilities, for frill subjects, for social entertainment."[12] In addition to spending their resources directly on academic matters, the Swiss also used a variety of grouping patterns that were appropriate to the academic aptitude of students. Although there were variations in organizational patterns, the curriculum in Swiss schools stressed basic academic subjects—language, mathematics, history, geography, science. Swiss educational excellence was also based on national examinations, which, while not compulsory, did encourage academic achievement.

In 1962, Rickover again testified before the House Appropriations Committee to report on British education. His remarks were amplified in his book, *American Education—A National Failure*, which appeared a year later.[13] Like Swiss schools, those in England used ability

grouping. He particularly admired the British use of examinations to match a student's ability to an appropriate type of schooling.

### Rickover's Recommendations

Based upon his comparisons of American and European educational systems, Rickover, like Bestor, proposed a general program of reform. His program included the following:

1. American educators need to commit themselves to liberal education, which for Rickover was that "marvelous pedagogical invention" —training the young to think and solve problems. Liberal education would provide the knowledge base for specialized and professional training.

2. The American commitment to the comprehensive high school as an agency of adolescent socialization must be abandoned and replaced by a secondary school system of multiple tracks that are appropriate to a student's academic ability.

3. A National Standards Committee should be established to keep the public informed about the condition of American education and to formulate national scholastic standards in order to make the U.S. internationally competitive.

4. Elementary and secondary education should provide a sufficiently broad terminal education for average and below average students to prepare them for a modern technological society and should provide a solid academic foundation for academically talented students to prepare them for subsequent professional education.

5. The public schools should concentrate on their proper function—the education of young minds.

### Max Rafferty

The contemporary basic education movement encompasses a wide spectrum of advocates ranging from academic scholars and scientists to the grass roots populist. In retrospect, the critics of the 1950s also could be placed on a continuum ranging from the scholar-historian Bestor to the more popular, grassroots educator-politician, Max Rafferty. A professional educator and school administrator, Rafferty was elected as California's superintendent of public instruction in 1962 and re-elected

in 1966 by wide margins. His last attempt at public office was an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate in 1968. Currently dean of education at Troy State University in Alabama, he also writes a widely syndicated newspaper column on education issues.

Rafferty represents the kind of basic education position that is derived from a conservative political ideology, but it has strong pedagogical implications. Although Bestor, Rickover, and Rafferty might agree on some of the weaknesses in American education and on some of the remedies for these weaknesses, their philosophical bases differ. Indeed, the differences of the late 1950s and the early 1960s that existed among the advocates of basic education are similar in some respects to the ambiguities in the current movement.

Rafferty's books, *Suffer, Little Children* (1962) and *What Are They Doing to Your Children?* (1964), reveal a conservative pedagogical position that is derived from a conservative political ideology. For Rafferty, America's cultural and educational heritage was conceived in the patriotism of the Revolutionary era and nurtured in the nineteenth century by the common school's devotion to literacy, civic responsibility, discipline, perseverence, and hard work.

In Rafferty's view of American educational history, the purpose of the public schools was distorted by the appearance of John Dewey, the Experimentalist educational philosophers, and the advocates of progressivism. The Experimentalists' stress on cultural and ethical relativism eroded the belief in unchanging moral values. Child-centered progressivism degenerated into socialization and life adjustment education that negated the school's function as an academic institution.

Based upon his interpretation of America's educational past, Rafferty's criticism of the conditions plaguing the public schools included: 1) a neglect of and a decline in academic standards throughout the schools; 2) a decline in respect for the authority of the teacher; 3) a lowering of moral and ethical standards in the schools that has led to delinquency and violence and to what Rafferty refers to as "the cult of the slob"; 4) a general decline of civic and cultural values because of the educational malaise in the schools.

As a political conservative, Rafferty's educational program is largely restorative and calls for a return to certain features of the past to

solve present problems. In this respect, Rafferty holds much in common with Bestor and Rickover. His remedy for a renewal of American education made in the mid-1960s also shows a philosophical parallel to the Essentialists of the 1930s and the contemporary advocates of basic education. In an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, Rafferty stated:

> . . . the purpose of a school is not to make pupils popular or well-adjusted or universally approved. It is to make them *learned*.
>
> It is to teach them to use the intellectual tools which the race, over the centuries, has found to be indispensable in the pursuit of truth.
>
> . . . the schools exist to teach organized, disciplined, systematic subject matter to the children. The schools are the only societal agencies specifically charged with the performance of this vital function. If the schools do not teach subject matter, the children are never going to learn it.[14]

Although there were other critics of American education in the late Fifties and early Sixties such as James D. Koerner, Mortimer Smith and others, Bestor, Rickover, and Rafferty were the most prominent national spokesmen for the basic education philosophy. Much of this philosophy continues today through the Council on Basic Education, which Bestor helped to organize.

## The Impact of the Critics of the 1950s

It is difficult to judge the degree to which the critics of the 1950s had an impact on American education. In some ways, their arguments were timely in that they coincided with the debate stimulated by the launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the enactment of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which funded a host of programs and research to improve instruction in science, mathematics, and foreign languages. The emergence of Master of Arts in Teaching programs in this decade placed a greater emphasis on academic subject matter in teacher preparation than had many traditional secondary teacher education programs. The educational critics of the 1950s certainly would have agreed with these trends. If they did not precipitate them, they certainly contributed to the climate of opinion that influenced educational reform in the first half of the 1960s.

The curriculum reforms of the early 1960s were not simply a matter

of restoring the traditional academic disciplines. Rather, the reforms, developed largely by academic scholars and scientists, focused on restructuring the elementary and secondary curriculum in the areas of mathematics, science, and the social studies. Other reforms of an organizational and instructional nature were team teaching, modular scheduling, individualized instruction, and open space education. The intention of the curricular innovations was generally to introduce students to the process of learning in much the same way that a scientist or scholar investigates a problem in a learned discipline. The organizational changes of the 1960s were designed to reduce the alleged rigidity of the self-contained classroom.

Although some improvements may have resulted from these innovations, they did create serious communication problems with parents and the general public. Parents could not relate to the new terminology. Terms such as structures, sets, spiral curriculum, and learning by objectives, were confusing to those whose education had been in another era. The various new organizational structures often made school seem like a foreign environment to parents. Today, among basic education advocates are many who are either suspicious of or hostile to innovations. Indeed, the only innovations that seem acceptable to them are those that provide evidence that students are mastering the basic skills and subjects.

If the early 1960s supported the trends back to basic education, the second half of that decade had the contrary effect. The educational policies of the federal government shifted to "Great Society" programs for compensatory education, Head Start, urban education, bilingual and bicultural education, and job training. The activism precipitated by opposition to the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam often spilled over into the high schools, with both students and teachers more socially and politically involved.

At the end of the decade and into the early 1970s, a new breed of critic emerged that called for a humanizing of the school. The message of the so-called neo-romantics such as Joseph Featherstone, Jonathan Kozol, John Holt, and others to reduce structure and sequence was quite different from that of Bagley, Bestor, Rickover, and Rafferty. Charles Silberman's *Crisis in the Classroom*, appearing in 1970, looked

to the British primary schools—not for rigorous academic standards but for progressive concepts of child freedom and liberation. One of the most severe critics was Ivan Illich who argued in *Deschooling Society* that schools were actually pernicious to education and should be abolished.

As the 1970s reached their midpoint, educational directions were not clear. Political, social, and economic forces that were external to the schools were pushing and pulling them in a variety of directions. Within schools, professional educators often seemed unable or unwilling to point the direction that public education needed to take. As the 1970s ended and the 1980s began, there appeared to be no commanding educational leader on the national scene. There was no Mann, Barnard, Harris, Eliot, Dewey, or Conant in sight.

## Return to Basic Education

By the mid-1970s, the issues that had been raised by Bagley and the Essentialists in the 1930s and by Bestor, Rickover and Rafferty in the 1950s returned to the national scene with the resurgent basic education movement. The current back-to-basics drive appears to enjoy a more pervasive and popular base of support than the earlier two movements. Although the educational climate of the late Seventies introduced new terminology that included words such as accountability, competency-based curriculum, and minimal competency testing, the important issues are philosophical ones that have remained unresolved for the last 50 years of America's educational history. Both the friends and foes of basic education need to address the following persistent philosophical questions that have emerged in the last half century:

What is a sound education?

What is a school?

What is the primary purpose of a school?

What is the nature of the curriculum?

The advocates of basic education need to ponder and answer these questions in the most coherent and comprehensive way possible so that their position is no longer based on scattered sources and conflicting opinions. Antagonists need to examine these questions in light of the historical perspective of the recurring themes of basic education. The issues raised are not fleeting ones that will go away. As they have appeared in our educational past, so they will occur in our educational future.

## Notes


1. Ben Brodinsky, "Back to the Basics: The Movement and Its Meaning," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1977, pp. 522-527.
2. Adolph E. Meyer, *The Development of Education in the Twentieth Century* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1949), p. 149.
3. William C. Bagley, "An Essentialism Platform for the Advancement of American Education," *Educational Administration and Supervision*, April 1938, pp. 241-256.
4. Ibid., p. 245.
5. Ibid., p. 251.
6. U.S. Office of Education, *Vitalizing Secondary Education*, in Franklin R. Zeran, *Life Adjustment Education in Action* (New York: Chartwell House, Inc., 1953) p. 43.
7. Arthur E. Bestor, *The Restoration of Learning* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 4.
8. Ibid.
9. Hyman G. Rickover, *Education and Freedom* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co.), p. 146.
10. Hyman G. Rickover, *Report on Russia: Hearings Before the House Committee on Appropriations—86th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 3.
11. Ibid., p. 2.
12. Hyman G. Rickover, *Swiss Schools and Ours: Why Theirs Are Better* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1962), pp. 30-31.
13. Hyman G. Rickover, *American Education—A National Failure* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1963).
14. Max Rafferty, "Schools Failing Their Mission, Expert Asserts," *Chicago Tribune*, 28 November 1965, pp. 1-2.

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